

3-1982

The Two Roles of Sam Rayburn

Anthony Champagne

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Champagne, Anthony (1982) "The Two Roles of Sam Rayburn," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol20/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

THE TWO ROLES OF SAM RAYBURN

by Anthony Champagne

Sam Rayburn served in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly one half of a century. He was first elected from the Fourth Congressional District of Texas in 1912 and served as the district's representative until his death in 1961. During that time, he worked closely with his fellow Texan, John Nance Garner, played a major role in the creation of the Roosevelt-Garner ticket in 1932, served as the workhorse of the New Deal during his chairmanship of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, served as Majority Leader, and then as the most powerful and most effective Speaker since Joseph Cannon served in that office early in this century. Rayburn was considered for Presidential nomination and more seriously considered for the Vice Presidency. He played a key role in such legislation as rural electrification, soil conservation, anti-monopoly laws, the regulation of railroads, utilities, and securities, the oil depletion allowance and the 1957 Civil Rights Act.

For at least one quarter of a century Rayburn played two roles: a district representative role and a Congressional leadership role. This paper is an effort to explain how Rayburn was able to successfully fill both roles even though his national and district roles did not always seem compatible.

The Rayburn Style

All people attempt to project a particular image to the world and Sam Rayburn was no exception.¹ At the outset of this discussion, it is important to note that Rayburn had an enormously complex personality. He balanced the roles of Speaker and district representative; he was one of the nation's most able legislators; he was comfortable with the good ole boys in Merit, Texas, and with representatives, senators, and presidents. Rayburn could be kind or cold, gruff or friendly, soft or hard. He could defend presidents and criticize them; support them and curse them. Congressman Richard Bolling may have best understood the complexity of the man and the Rayburn style,

[Rayburn] was infinitely being presented as this wonderfully simple presence until you got to know him. He was one of the most complex people I ever saw. He presented an image that he made up in his own mind sometime in the late teens of the century or the '20's. That was always the image that he held, but behind that, there was this infinitely complex subtlety.²

Anthony Champagne is an associate professor of political science at The University of Texas at Dallas. He has conducted over sixty interviews with associates of Sam Rayburn and is writing a book on Sam Rayburn and His District.

Rayburn grew up on a small farm and had known poverty in his youth. He had been a cotton farmer and knew the difficulties of rural life. Rayburn stressed his upbringing in many of his speeches within his Northeast Texas district which was comprised of Fannin, Grayson, Hunt, Kaufman, Rockwall, Collin, and Rains counties. He presented the image of a lifelong farmer who was in government to try to relieve the burdens and drudgery of farm life. He often talked about how his father had given him \$25.00 when he went to Commerce to attend Mayo College and how he worked his way through college. It was an image of a poor, hard working, country boy who worked hard, got an education, and did well without ever forgetting his origins or his ambition to make life better for people who were then living on the farms. One of Rayburn's friends described the Rayburn image, "Many times I have heard him tell the story of his little country schooling and his mother and father. I think this is what gave him such great ties to his people. As a country kid myself, and going to a three teacher school, gosh, I could relate to that. So could everybody in his district. We all felt like he was one of us."²

Rayburn was born in 1882 and was given the name Samuel Taliaferro Rayburn. It was a name that was too fancy and when Rayburn went into politics it was dropped in favor of the much plainer name, Sam Rayburn. Rayburn sought identification by his constituents as one who was a kindred spirit, one with similar origins and values. "Sam," said one of his county leaders, "was as common as an old shoe."³ If Rayburn ever chewed tobacco in Washington, it was not recalled by a long time aide.⁴ In the district, however, Rayburn always seemed to have a plug of tobacco in his cheek. Somehow he always seemed to manage to spit in the fireplace of his home when constituents were visiting.⁵ If nothing else, they would remember that Mr. Sam was just a plain fellow, one who even spit tobacco in his fireplace. In Washington, Rayburn wore suits which were tailor made. One would never see him wearing khakis, an old shirt, and a slouchy hat. In Bonham that was Rayburn's regular attire.⁶ Over twenty years after his death, Rayburn's friends remembered him wearing a torn shirt, or old fashioned shoes, or khakis and an old hat, or tying a knot in his shoelaces because they were too short to tie a bow. Once Rayburn got to Bonham, his voice seemed to change. The East Texas accent became more pronounced and the drawl thickened. In Bonham, he cut his own wood and worked his cattle. He would tease men who smoked "women's cigarettes" which were filter tips, his brand being unfiltered Camels, and in Bonham he never rode in the Speaker's limosine or the Cadillac given him by members of Congress. Instead, he rode in his well dented pickup truck or his sister's Plymouth.⁷

One long time staff member noted that Rayburn in the district

was a different man from Rayburn in Washington.⁹ In his later years in Washington, Rayburn was not only the most powerful member of the House, he was a revered institution. He was the distinguished, reserved, almost worshipped Speaker. John Brademas described the Washington Rayburn,

[Rayburn] had immense moral authority around here. He was Speaker longer than anybody in history. Just his mere physical presence commanded great, great respect . . . You approached him almost as if you were approaching a divinity.¹⁰

In Bonham, Rayburn seemed to relax. He was much more informal. It was almost as if there were two Sam Rayburns: The Washington Rayburn and the Bonham Rayburn—two aspects of the man, both well suited if not necessary for Rayburn's political well being.

Character

Rayburn had a personal trait which is worthy of special mention. His life style was a simple one and did not change even after he was the Speaker for years. His Washington apartment though pleasant, was the same one that he lived in for over twenty years, and it would never be described as elegant. His home, though comfortable, was one that he built in 1916. Rather than buy a color television, he purchased a piece of multi-colored plastic, which when placed over the screen of a black and white television gave an approximation of a color television picture. It was a simplicity of life style which projected an image of honesty.¹¹

Rayburn was quite proud of his reputation for honesty and for being a man of his word. In fact, he made efforts to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. Quite contrary to common practice, after Rayburn went to Congress he did not maintain a law office at home. That way there was no danger of a conflict between his Congressional work and his legal affairs. Rayburn also made it a practice to own no stocks or bonds. He did not even keep his money in a savings account for fear that a conflict might arise over federal regulations of those rates and his savings. All his savings were kept in a checking account or were invested in his farm or his ranch. Rayburn did not accept honorariums for speeches and frequently even paid his own expenses when he was invited to speak.¹² Perhaps Rayburn's greatest pleasure was the Sam Rayburn Library which was constructed with private donations. Even in reference to Library donations, Rayburn showed concern over the appropriateness of accepting funds. On one occasion, for example, a wealthy man made a very large donation to the Library and Rayburn insisted that the money be returned since Rayburn had suspicions about the donor's character and feared the donor was trying to influence Rayburn through such a substantial gift.¹³

Rayburn's ethical behavior did not go unnoticed. It was used during some of his campaigns for office to show that his election would result in the election of an honest man. For example, a 1932 election flyer states, "We submit that Sam Rayburn owns no stocks or bonds, but that his savings are in a farm in Fannin County; that he was reared on a farm and that, therefore he has the interests of the farmer at heart . . ."¹⁴ His honesty likely benefited him as Speaker as well since it would be important to other members of Congress that the Speaker be above reproach.

Rayburn took pride in being a man of his word. Time and again, Rayburn's associates emphasized that if Rayburn gave his word on something, he kept that promise.¹⁵ It was a valuable trait for the Washington Rayburn since so much of the negotiation in the legislative arena is based on trust. A politician who earns the reputation of being untrustworthy will often find that he has difficulty working with other politicians. The Bonham Rayburn also stressed the value of one's word. Rayburn almost never told a constituent that he would do something. Instead, Rayburn would tell the constituent, "I'll see what I can do" or "I'll look into that." For Rayburn promises were never given lightly.¹⁶

Rayburn was a man from humble origins, he presented the image of being unpretentious and personally honest. With such an image, a politician in the district would readily inspire support and trust. Senator Henry Jackson noted that a major component of Rayburn's success was his character. His constituents trusted him and had faith in him. Jackson pointed out:

Had he [Rayburn] been merely a representative, voting as a representative from Bonham, there is no doubt in my mind that a representative . . . from that district would have voted differently than the Speaker . . . He was a big enough man, he had the stature, he had the respect in his district that they allowed him to do those things . . . So character, integrity, respect, all those things play a very important role in my judgment, in how people vote. That was the genius of Mr. Rayburn. Mr. Rayburn was an institution and his opponents could get up and say he was a Socialist, a radical, he was way out there, but who is going to believe it down there because he was a respected man.¹⁷

Rayburn apparently shared the belief that votes were often cast on the basis of the character of the candidates. When he campaigned, according to one of Rayburn's county leaders,

He would go around and meet people around over the district, he wouldn't promise all sorts of things he knew he probably couldn't deliver on. He tried to tell them something about himself; what kind of man he was. And then, in effect, he said to them, "If you think I am the kind of man you can feel comfortable with having

as your representative in Washington, then I would like your vote. Otherwise, then you should vote for somebody else. I can't sit here now and tell you how I am going to vote on all these issues that are going to come up in the next two years, but I will tell you this: I will vote on each one of them only after a study of the pros and cons and I'll vote to the best of my judgment and conscience."¹⁴

Character is a difficult concept to define in politics and there were those in the district who did not see Rayburn as a man of character. However, Rayburn's folksy style coupled with his integrity caused him to have a huge following in the district who had great respect and admiration for the man. Such a personal following allowed Rayburn considerable flexibility in his Washington political behavior because so many of his constituents felt he could do no wrong. An ability to relate to constituents and character while important, however, was not sufficient for Rayburn's success in the district. It was also always made clear to the people of the Fourth District that Sam Rayburn was effective in Washington and that he benefited the district.

The Benefits To The District

Ultimately, the test of a politician's worth is his ability to satisfy constituents, and they have insatiable appetites.¹⁵ Few congressmen have been as fortunate and as skilled as was Rayburn in being the guiding hand for several laws, two, in particular, which rapidly and dramatically affected the lives of thousands of constituents. Rayburn rarely gave a speech without mentioning rural electrification and farm-to-market roads. Both resulted from Rayburn's legislative activities. Electricity revolutionized life on the farm. Rayburn said, "It will take some of the harsh labor off the backs of the farm men and women. Can you imagine what it will mean to a farm wife to have a pump in the well and lights in the house?"¹⁶ Rayburn might have also asked if one could imagine the rewards to a rural congressman who authored rural electrification legislation. That act alone was enough for many of Rayburn's constituents to feel forever indebted to him.¹⁷

Rayburn was fond of saying, "I want my people out of the mud and I want my people out of the dark." Rural electrification got those people out of the dark, farm-to-market roads got them out of the mud. Rayburn stressed that his efforts had obtained federal money for rural, farm-to-market roads. In the black lands of the Fourth District, wet weather makes the rural dirt roads impassable. The black earth becomes a bog through which it would be difficult to ride horseback and impossible to drive. Rayburn knew how valuable hard surfaced farm-to-market roads were to the district and in speeches he would say such things as,

I've been out on a farm and was so lonely that I was just hoping somebody would pass so I could see a horse, or a wagon go by.

When you are bogged down out there and can't go anywhere, the farmers can't get their children to school, they can't get their produce to market, they can't get to a doctor if they are sick.²²

It was those memories, Rayburn claimed, that caused him to insist that the highway bill provide funds for secondary as well as major highways.²³ In addition to rural electrification and farm-to-market roads, Rayburn was a strong advocate of soil conservation programs, programs which were very valuable to a district such as the Fourth where much of the land had been significantly eroded.²⁴

A very important contribution to the district was Lake Texoma. The gigantic lake, one of the largest man made lakes in the United States, covers 89,000 surface acres and can hold 2,722,000 acre feet of water. It is located in both Texas and Oklahoma and is formed by the Red and Washita Rivers. The water, impounded by the Denison Dam, is too salty for consumption, but the project protects thousands of acres from floods, has great recreational value, and supplies hydro-electric power.²⁵ Another major water project was Lake Lavon, located in Collin County on the East Fork of the Trinity River. Lake Lavon cost \$12,000,000 and stores 425,000 acre feet of water. Contrary to the water carried by the Red River, the water in the Trinity River is not salty and Lake Lavon's water is used for consumption. Nearly one fourth of the lake's capacity is dedicated to the use of water-starved communities in the area. Lake Lavon is not a power source, though it has recreational value and has major soil conservation and flood control purposes.²⁶ Rayburn is also largely responsible for other smaller lakes in the district. In Fannin County these lakes would include Lake Fannin, Bonham State Park Lake, Coffee Mill Lake, and Lake Davey Crockett.²⁷

Rayburn also brought military bases to the district. These included Perrin Field near Sherman, Jones Field near Bonham, and Majors Field near Greenville. The bases were all flight training schools, the largest being Perrin Field. During World War II, about 5,500 pilots graduated from Perrin Field's basic flying school.²⁸

Rayburn was also largely responsible for the establishment of a War Department hospital in McKinney. The hospital had 1,500 beds and functioned as a center for the care of those wounded during World War II. After the war, the size of the hospital was reduced to 620 beds and the hospital was transferred to the Veteran's Administration.²⁹ The hospital remained open until after Rayburn's death. Rayburn's influence brought a veterans' domiciliary to Bonham as well. The domiciliary provided a home for veterans who were unable to care for themselves and who had no home. It had 300 domiciliary beds and 50 hospital beds. It also provided jobs for 262 people most of whom were Fourth District residents.³⁰

Over the years Rayburn was also instrumental in bringing numerous temporary projects to the district. For example, during the Depression Rayburn was influential in obtaining several Civilian Conservation Corps camps for the district.³² During World War II, his efforts led to the location of a prisoner of war camp in Kaufman County. Since the POW's worked on neighboring farms, the camp functioned to relieve the labor shortages on the farms.³³ These projects were coupled with effective work at more routine levels, such as obtaining an upward adjustment in the federal payment toward construction programs and aiding localities and businesses in cutting through red tape. Rayburn was also known as a Congressman who was interested in individual problems of constituents and as a Congressman who could be of great help to individuals in their dealings with government agencies.³⁴ Such effectiveness built up a vast storehouse of personal and community debts which were owed Rayburn. Payments on these debts were, of course, made by supporting and voting for Mr. Sam.

Rayburn's ability to bring so many benefits to his district was in large part due to the leadership positions that he held in the House. Interestingly, his leadership in the House was based upon his secure district base and the political flexibility that the secure base gave him. It was this interaction between his Washington and district roles that together explain Rayburn's remarkable political longevity and effectiveness.

The Interaction Between Leadership Roles

Rayburn the Fourth District Congressman and Rayburn the Speaker were generally compatible roles for Rayburn, but the roles did not always mesh. As Henry Jackson has pointed out, when Rayburn assumed the power of the Speakership, he also had to realize that he was more than a Northeast Texas Congressman. Jackson stated,

He wore two hats; (1) representing his district, and (2) being a leader of a party that embraced diverse political views. He made a decision when he became Speaker. To the extent he wanted to stay as Speaker, it was his responsibility and duty to help other members who had problems other than agriculture, namely the cities. He wouldn't go to extremes. He sort of carved an independent course. He was supportive of aid to the cities. He was supportive of programs that essentially had an orientation in favor of the North. He was strongly supportive of Western interests in the field of irrigation, reclamation, the building of power dams, basic public resource development.³⁵

This attempt to balance his role as Speaker and as district representative was not always an easy one. In 1944, for example, Rayburn was challenged by state senator G. C. Morris. Morris had made an outstanding state legislative record as the leading opponent of Governor "Pappy" O'Daniel's transactions tax and Rayburn recognized that Morris was

a very serious opponent.³⁴ As Speaker, however, Rayburn's time and energy was spent in Washington due to the war and Rayburn was not able to build and mend political fences in the district.³⁵ In addition, Rayburn's leadership role put him in the position of being blamed for the burdens and inconveniences of the war effort.³⁶ As Jackson recalled, "It was tough for him" and in 1944 Rayburn had a "hard campaign against him" because he was charged with being "too liberal" in that he supported programs as a national leader which a Bonham Congressman would not be inclined to support.³⁷ Rayburn weathered that 1944 challenge. Even though there was pride that the Fourth District had the Speaker as its Congressman,³⁸ the 1944 election does point out that there is a fine balance that Rayburn had to maintain the representation of local district interests and national concerns.

Time and again, Rayburn faced the charge that he was Speaker at the expense of representing the interests of his district. In 1948, for example, Rayburn was attacked for being pro-civil rights. Rayburn's supporters wrote him that he was in danger of losing the election because he was closely tied in people's minds with President Harry S. Truman and Truman's civil rights program.³⁹ In 1952 as well, though Rayburn ran against a far weaker candidate, there was also an attempt to blame Rayburn for the unpopular policies of the Truman Administration.⁴⁰

How then did Rayburn maintain that balance between national and district roles? Much of the explanation goes back to Rayburn's style. His down-to-earth, folksy style in the district allowed him to relate to and establish a personal bond with his constituents. That characteristic, coupled with Rayburn's character and integrity, built a vast reservoir of trust and goodwill among his constituents. It was a feeling well expressed by one of his long time supporters,

My feeling about Mr. Sam and I know my father's as well, was that he was going to do the right thing and he was going to do what was right and fair and honest. There would be nothing devious about him and there would be no sell out. We might wonder why he voted that way but as far as I was concerned, it might be something that I'd think I'd be against, but if he voted for it, I'd think, well, I'm just not informed enough.⁴¹

In addition to that trust in Rayburn it was clear that Rayburn was effective as a legislator in benefiting the district. Such an abundance of trust, goodwill, and indebtedness of constituents to him for his successful efforts in their behalf gave him a great deal of political security in his district and the necessary freedom of action in Washington to function as a national political leader.⁴²

NOTES

This research was partially funded by a University of Texas at Dallas organized research grant and the Sam Rayburn Foundation. The author is also indebted to H. G. Dulaney, Director of the Sam Rayburn Library for his assistance in this research.

¹For an excellent treatment of the projection of images by people in public life see, Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home Style* (Boston, 1978), 54-135.

²Richard Bolling, interview, June 26, 1980. [Transcripts of all interviews, letters, newspapers, and other materials are on file in the Sam Rayburn Library, Bonham, Texas.]

³Truitt Smith, interview, May 16, 1980.

⁴R. C. Slagle, interview, October 17, 1980.

⁵H. G. Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980.

⁶For example, Slagle, interview, October 17, 1980; Ed Nash, interview, June 5, 1980.

⁷Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980; Martha Rayburn Dye, interview, December 2, 1980.

⁸Rayburn's informality at home was stressed by Nash, interview, June 5, 1980; Grover Sellers, interview, October 6, 1979; Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980; Rene Kimbrough, interview, November 23, 1980; Robert Bradshaw, interview, May 11, 1981; Paul Hardin, interview, November 5, 1980; Kate Reed Estes, interview, February 13, 1981.

⁹Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980.

¹⁰John Brademas, interview, June 24, 1980.

¹¹Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980; Vernon Beckham, interview, December 17, 1980; Estes, interview, February 13, 1981.

¹²Dulaney, interview, August 15, 1980.

¹³Cecil Dickson, interview, June 29, 1980.

¹⁴"To the Voters of the Fourth Congressional District," Campaign leaflet, 1932 Texas and District Political file, Sam Rayburn Papers.

¹⁵For example, Henry Jackson, interview, June 12, 1980; Levis Hall, interview, May 29, 1980; Aubrey McAlester, interview, August 17, 1981.

¹⁶Hall, interview, May 29, 1980; McAlester, interview, August 17, 1981.

¹⁷Jackson, interview, June 12, 1980.

¹⁸Hall, interview, May 29, 1980.

¹⁹See David Mayhew, *The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, 1974) for a useful treatment of Congressmen—constituency relations.

²⁰Quoted in H. G. Dulaney, Edward Hake Phillips, and MacPhelan Reese (eds.), *Speak Mr. Speaker* (Bonham, Texas, 1978), 60.

²¹Estes, interview, February 13, 1981.

²¹Estes, interview, February 13, 1981.

²²D. M. Tunnell, interview, November 21, 1980.

²³Tunnell, interview, November 21, 1980.

²⁴For a treatment of Rayburn's interest in soil conservation, see Valton J. Young, *The Speaker's Agent* (New York, 1956).

²⁵Dallas Morning News, *Texas Almanac 1980-1981* (Dallas, 1981), 87.

²⁶Hardin, interview, November 5, 1980.

²⁷"Editorial," *McKinney Weekly Democrat Gazette*, July 15, 1948, 1.

²⁸Texas State Historical Association, *The Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2 (Austin, 1952), 363.

²⁹"War Department Gives Its Approval For 1,500 Bed Army Hospital For McKinney; To Serve North Texas," *McKinney Daily Courier-Gazette*, September 4, 1942, p. 1; Texas State Historical Association, *Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2, 838.

³⁰"Tentative Staffing Plan for GM and S Hospital, Bonham, Texas," Domiciliary Information File, Sam Rayburn Papers.

³¹Bill Wilcox, interview, August 22, 1980.

³²Tunnell, interview, November 21, 1980.

³³McAlester, interview, August 17, 1981.

³⁴Jackson, interview, June 12, 1980.

³⁵For a discussion of the O'Daniel period which includes Morris' role see S. S. McKay, *W. Lee O'Daniel and Texas Politics, 1938-1942* (Lubbock, 1944).

³⁶This point is made by one of Rayburn's closest friends and one of his Grayson County leaders, Lee Simmons. See Lee Simmons to Sam Rayburn, June 19, 1944.

³⁷"Teachers G. C. Morris for Congress Club," Campaign leaflet, 1944 Texas and District Political file, Sam Rayburn papers.

³⁸Jackson, interview, June 12, 1980.

³⁹Hall, interview, May 29, 1980.

⁴⁰Rayburn's leader in Hunt County was one of the first to warn him of the dangers of being tied too closely to the Truman Administration. See G. C. Harris to Sam Rayburn, February 12, 1948 and G. C. Harris to Sam Rayburn, February 16, 1948.

⁴¹For example, Frederick I. Massengill, Jr., one of Rayburn's leaders in Kaufman County reported that some of Rayburn's opposition in Frisco was due to anti-administration feelings. See Frederick I. Massengill, Jr., to Sam Rayburn, June 11, 1952.

⁴²Estes, interview, February 13, 1981.

⁴³Fenno suggests the need for Congressional leaders to have considerable of action. See Fenno, *Home Style*, 214-248.